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“Obviously in the cool group they wear designer things.”

A Social Practice Theory Perspective on Children’s Consumption

“I eat my peas with honey,
I’ve done it all my life.
It makes the peas taste funny,
But it keeps them on the knife.”

If you find this anonymous children’s poem funny, it is because you have implicitly understood since childhood that one does not eat from a knife but from a fork. If you learnt to eat using chopsticks then the humour is lost – you do not understand the social practice. From birth, children absorb and rehearse, with little conscious or critical thought, a great many social practices such as using a toilet, eating in company and engaging with the commercial world. The form varies across cultures, but the existence of social practice to order human action is consistent; “there is nowhere to go outside the world of practice” (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p.126). Practices are the stuff of the routinized, automatic everyday tasks that we all perform. The right way of doing them is ‘obvious’ to the regular performers, and alien to outsiders. It is our contention that we can gain new and illuminating insights by viewing children’s consumption as a social practice that is as automated and routinized as eating with a knife and fork. We believe this perspective can make three contributions. Firstly it provides a much needed new theoretical perspective beyond the dominant but limited ‘consumer socialisation’ research paradigm that confines analysis of children’s consumption to the functioning of their individual cognitive capacity. Secondly it suggests new research methodologies for understanding the interaction between children and the commercial world. Thirdly it offers a different approach to policy makers tasked with the controversial issue of regulating marketing to children.

Our paper firstly briefly reviews the theoretical lenses through which children’s consumption has been examined over the past 15 years. Secondly we present the key characteristics of social practice theories and then the - thus far rather limited - ways in which they have been applied to consumption. Thirdly we outline what we believe these theories have to offer the study of children’s consumption. Fourthly we present the findings of a study using a Social Practice Theory (SPT) framework to analyse qualitative discussions about the acquisition and use of consumer goods with 58 UK children aged 8-13. Finally we discuss the theoretical, methodological and societal implications of applying a Social Practice Theory perspective to children’s consumption and propose

an agenda for both future research and actions by policy makers to advance and bolster this new and promising field.

Theoretical Approaches to Children's Consumption

The marketing literature relating to children's consumption has been and continues to be dominated by 'consumer socialisation' research (John, 1999) that is heavily underpinned by cognitive, developmental psychology and that aims principally to understand how individual children accrue - across predictable 'age-stages' (Piaget, 1960) - an increasing level of sophistication in interpreting marketing messages and operating competently and autonomously within the market place (*e.g.* John, 1999; Oates *et al.*, 2001; Chaplin and John, 2007). John's (1999) 25 year review continues to be a landmark reference and contemporary work on core socialisation themes such as childhood materialism (*e.g.* Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003; Oprea *et al.*, 2012) and advertising literacy (*e.g.* Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2010) are still firmly fixed within the cognitive psychology paradigm. Such research has also investigated the effects on children's behaviour of various 'socialisation agents' such as parents (*e.g.* Flouri, 1999), peers (*e.g.* Banerjee and Dittmar, 2008) and the media (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003; Twenge and Kasser, 2013). This paradigmatic lens privileges a view of consumption as a force exerted by marketers on individual children and has tended to focus public debate on definitions of 'fair' marketing and specifically on pinpointing the age at which children are cognitively and socially capable of being 'savvy' and thus no longer 'vulnerable' to undue external commercial pressures (Cross, 2004; Langer, 2004). The language used by governments manifests the embeddedness of this mode of thinking about childhood consumption. For example the use of the word "impact" in the title of a UK government-commissioned review "The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing" (DCSF/DCMS, 2009) reinforces the received view that the system that provides consumption objects is external to and separate from the world of children and somehow collides with small individuals.

This research focus on the 'solitary subject' (Ritson and Elliott, 1999, p.260) is being challenged by an increasing number of authors. Nairn *et al.* (2008) proposed an interpretation of children's consumption as more culturally constituted and used Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) to illuminate some of the complex social roles played by brand symbols in children's everyday lives, such as how toys are used to reinforce gender positions and how the notion of "cool" is highly contested terrain in primary schools, whilst Gaya Wickes *et al.* (2009) showed how 7-11 year olds used commodified celebrities as resources to discuss and debate moral issues. Ritson and Elliott's (1999) ethnographic study turned to Uses and Gratifications Theory (O'Donohoe, 1994) in conjunction with Reader Response Theory (Scott, 1994) to analyse the social use of adverts by adolescents in the natural

setting of the sixth form common room. They found that adverts and the text embedded within them were used both individually by young people to gain group access, to fit in and to negotiate a place in the social hierarchy, and collectively to establish group rituals and metaphors. In this view the focus shifts from powerful consumption forces to groups of agentic children using the objects supplied by the market place to skilfully navigate social situations.

Away from the marketing literature, sociologists began to look at children's consumption during the 1990s. This research has been dominated by a 'production of consumption' perspective (Featherstone, 1990) which foregrounds the marketplace offerings that children consume (Martens *et al.*, 2004). Media (Alexander, 1994; Buckingham and Willett, 2006) and toys (Best, 1998; Cross, 1998) have received most attention. 'Production of consumption' research can lead to a focus on physical, emotional or moral dangers from consumption, such as the literature considering unhealthy food marketing to children (*e.g.* Montgomery and Chester, 2009) or the narrow sexual stereotyping of toys such as Barbie (Rogers, 1999), but sociological perspectives have also produced a rich stream of research investigating the symbolic meanings of consumption particularly in relation to identity formation. Examples relating to young people's use of clothes include Marion and Nairn's (2011) exploration of French teenage girls' fashion tactics in building narrative identities, Croghan *et al.*'s (2006) discussion of 'style failure' amongst UK teens or Elliott and Leonard's (2004) study of the important signalling role of the 'right brand' of trainers amongst low income young people.

However, as Martens *et al.* (2004, p.161) pointed out ten years ago "relatively little is known about how children engage in *practices* of consumption or what the significance of this is to their everyday lives" (our italics). This remains true today although as we shall see below the application of SPT to the field of adult consumption is beginning to gain momentum (Martens and Scott, 2005; Warde, 2005; Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Denegri-Knott, and Molesworth, 2010; Martens, 2012; Holttinen, 2014).

Social Practice Theories

Social Practice Theories are grounded in the thinking of sociologists such as Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Giddens (1984, 1991) and Taylor (1971) and have been reinvigorated by German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2002) and American philosopher Ted Schatzki (1996; 2002). According to Halkier *et al.*'s (2011, p.3) definition in their introduction to a special issue on applying social practice to consumption, "practice theories are a set of cultural and philosophical accounts that focus on the conditions surrounding the practical carrying out of social life." SPT is different from the 'consumer socialisation', 'CCT', 'uses and gratifications' and 'production of consumption' approaches to child

consumption described above in that the research spotlight is directed away from the individual child, the marketplace and even the child's social and cultural milieu, and shone instead on the reproduction of practices. In line with Giddens' theory of structuration (1984, p.2) what is being studied is "neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but the social practices ordered across space and time." As he goes on to say, "Human social activities... are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves in mundane everyday life."

The notion of practices being 'ordered' or organised is particularly important and Schatzki builds on Giddens' theory (1996, p.89) in defining a practice as "an organised nexus of actions." He sees actions as organised or linked in three major ways: "(1) through understandings, for example, of what to say and do; (2) through explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) through what I will call "teleoaffective" structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods."

Social practice theories and consumption

Warde (2005) was arguably the first to specifically apply practice theories to the domain of consumption. As a sociologist his interest in consumption lies in the way that conventions of practices govern the manner that marketplace objects are deployed as well as an understanding of their social significance. He thus defines consumption as "a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive, or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion" (p.137). Since 2005 research taking a social practice perspective on consumption has focused largely on practices that produce over-consumption and as such has been part of policy-driven agenda on issues such as environment, sustainability and taking exercise (e.g. Shove and Pantzar, 2009; Røpke, 2009; Shove, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011) and has become an important part in government debate over behaviour change (Shove *et al.*, 2009; Chatterton and Anderson, 2011). Within the marketing academy practice theory has also been used in an eclectic set of other terrains such as understanding green consumers (Connolly and Prothero, 2008), analysing the practice of DIY (Watson and Shove, 2008) and in relation to resource theory (Arnould, 2008). However, these studies are scarce and none have applied practice theory to the study of children's consumption.

Social practice theories and children's consumption

We view children's consumption through the 'practice' lens, in the sense of Schatzki's (1996) 'nexus of actions' that are organised around implicit understandings, explicit rules, and teleoaffective structures. Childhood is above all a time when humans learn. Beyond formal education much of children's everyday life is spent implicitly observing and reproducing a host of (often very complex) social practices that allow children to function smoothly within society. In this sense, consumption is also a practice that children learn, and their "appropriation and appreciation ... of goods, services, performances..." (Warde, 2005, p.137) becomes a largely "recurrent and non-reflexive behaviour" (Southerton, 2013) like any other. Practices consist of interrelating and inter-reliant elements described in rather general terms by Reckwitz (2002, p.149) in his seminal overview paper as "bodily and mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge". However, as we might expect with a theory that is rapidly finding new applications, there is debate regarding its operationalization and particularly in relation to which elements should be included in defining and analysing a practice. As noted above, Schatzki (1996) refers to 'understandings,' 'rules' and 'teleoaffective structures', an approach followed by Martens (2012), whereas Warde (2005) talks of "understandings, procedures and engagements"; a version that has been applied to consumption research by Halkier and Jensen (2011). Meanwhile Shove *et al.* (2012) point to the importance of objects for social practice (such as knives and forks in our example in the introduction); something Reckwitz (2002) also noted in his original definition. For him, in "practice theory, objects are necessary components" (p.256) and indeed Röpke's (2009) review of applied SPT research suggests there is now broad agreement amongst current theorists on including material objects. Given this recent trend we decided to frame our investigation using Shove *et al.*'s (2012) structure of three elements; 'materials', 'competences' and 'meanings'. 'Competences' encompass Schatzki's 'understandings' as well as 'rules' and represents 'multiple forms of understanding and knowledgeability' (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p.23); 'meanings' includes 'teleoeffective structures' and represents more broadly 'the social and symbolic significance' (p.24) of a practice. Following Shove *et al.* (2012) we assign great importance to the links between these 3 elements as the structure of a practice depends primarily on specific combinations of materials, meanings and competences.

Methodology

Empirical research into a social practice presents a number of methodological issues given that the aim is to shed light on an invisible set of structures beyond the view of the interviewee (Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Martens, 2012). Yet, rather surprisingly, serious consideration of the analytical translation of SPT into empirical research is extremely recent and there is thus little previous

empirical work on which to draw. In her study of dishwashing, Marten's (2012) placed 24/7 CCTV cameras in her participants' kitchens to record the activity of the practice. In our case this was neither possible nor desirable given the diverse locations of consumption practice and sensitive ethical considerations involved in videoing young people. However, Martens (2012) also suggests using qualitative interviews on the grounds that the "discursive interaction between researchers and research participants" (p.1) presents an appropriate way of exploring the structure of linkages between the elements of a practice. Taking the view that children are, in Reckwitz's words (2002) "carriers" of the practice (p.256) and a 'crossing point' between various practices rather than the focus of the research, an analysis of their talk on the subject of consumption was considered likely to reveal whether or not there are consistent combinations of consumption materials, shared meanings associated with them and a discrete set of understandings, skills and goals that together might constitute a practice of consumption.

The qualitative interview data had been collected for another purpose; as part of a project for UNICEF UK exploring the links between materialism, well-being and inequality in 8-13 year olds across the UK, Spain and Sweden (Nairn and Ipsos MORI, 2011). Over 200 children were interviewed in total, although, our analysis is limited to data from the UK sample (n=58), to obviate national consumption practice differences diluting our insights into underlying structures. The sample was drawn from six socio-economically varied schools across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In four schools, two group discussions were held, and in the remaining two schools one group discussion was supplemented with two depth interviews with rather isolated children who the teachers had identified as likely to respond better in a one-to-one context. All but two of the groups was mixed gender; these two being with girls only. Whilst UNICEF was interested in the role of inequality, the focus in this paper is the social practice and not the characteristics of children and we therefore do not specifically analyse socio-economic or age differences.

The topic guide had been designed to allow children to express themselves freely on issues related to consumer goods, wellbeing and inequality and the resulting data offered a good opportunity to access the structure of the children's consumption practice. Each interviewer followed the same discussion guide (see Appendix 1) which took children through six topics and activities. For example, children were presented with a scenario in which a child with lots of money and 'cool stuff' spent little time with his/her parents and another had few cool things and little money but spent lots of time with his/her family. The children were encouraged to discuss which child was happier and why. Where children consented, discussions were audio-recorded and these were subsequently

transcribed. In total transcriptions from 9 in-school group discussions and 4 interviews with 58 individuals were available for analysis, amounting to around 80,000 words.

Analysis

A standardized process of thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke, 2012) to mine the data as deeply as possible and generate theoretical insights (induction). The transcripts were first searched for emergent codes, which were labeled as nodes in NVIVO. These codes sought to describe observed patterns in the children's discourse on consumption. Once analysis had progressed and the number of these nodes expanded, SPT emerged as a fruitful way of making sense of that data. As such, nodes were grouped into three umbrella themes, corresponding to the three SPT elements of competence, meaning and materials. Once these umbrella themes had been described, analysis continued and sub-themes with both latent and semantic characteristics were expanded and linked across a further two layers to identify examples of specific inter-related phenomena. For example, within the umbrella theme of 'competence', the sub-node of 'social consumption performance' was developed, and within that there was further segregation of data into 'negative perception of being spoilt' and 'product knowledge'. A total of 372 passages were coded, including 184 within the three umbrella themes central to our SPT analysis. Within the 'meaning' umbrella theme there were 119 coded passages, in the 'material' theme there were 35 passages and in the 'competence' theme there were 30.

This clearly visualized thematic analysis allowed the researchers to easily access the data from multiple entry-points and also discuss the significance of the various themes in the light of the existing literature and the SPT theoretical framework. NVIVO also allowed the researchers to share annotations on particular passages in the data, and enabled them to discuss the thematic map as it developed to ensure researcher agreement had been reached.

In addition to this coding, word search queries were used to identify instances when keywords, such as 'cool', 'obvious' and 'popular' were mentioned by the children. These instances were then re-read and analysed for their context and significance with regards to consumption. Word counts were also run to establish a picture of the language most commonly used by the children.

Findings

The aim of our empirical study was to discover, through analysing the children's talk, how the structure of the social practice of consumption manifests itself in their everyday lives. We thus sought to identify what Reckwitz (2002) calls three 'blocks' of interconnected elements which we

label as materials, meanings and competences (Shove *et al.*, 2012) and which exist “not just in the minds of actors but are out there in the practice... [itself]” (Taylor, 1971, p.27).

In terms of materials it quickly became apparent from the children’s talk that consumption goods or materials are assumed to be an important resource in their lives. As Lily comments, “Well, *obviously* everyone wants a lot of things” (School 1 Group 2, 10/11yrs, emphasis added). Moreover consumption was seen as a routine requiring inevitable repetition. Alex comments that when he gets something new “you sort of feel like...disappointed... because you *know* that in a month it’ll be boring and you’ll want something else.” (School 4 Group 8, 10/11yrs, emphasis added). Beyond this the specific consumption materials that emerged from the discussions were limited in range and regularly and consistently repeated across the data. The children referred to technological items including laptops, games consoles and mobile phones, clothes, collectibles such as Dr Who paraphernalia and pets. The technological and fashion items were most commonly referenced, and almost always by specific brand. These brands tended to be treated as having material form linguistically represented by the children as uncountable nouns as in “Do you have *any* Hollister or *any* Abercrombie?” (School 7 Group 12, 11/12yrs - our italics). The use of the word “any” underscores the unimportance of the product relative to the brand badge. For the purposes of this paper we will concentrate on the most commonly cited materials: branded technology and clothes.

The meaning *i.e.* “social and symbolic significance” (Shove *et al.*, 2002, p.23) of these particular objects could also be reduced to a small, consistent set; product functionality such as using a phone to call home; reinforcing an emotional bond for example through gift giving and receiving; compensating for a broken emotional bond, such as wanting a pet to avoid feeling lonely; and finally associations between consumption and social position in the peer hierarchy. This latter meaning was undoubtedly the strongest with particular brands of technology and clothes associated with particular social positions. For example, as we will see, a social group called ‘the populars’ or ‘the cool group’ feature consistently in children’s discourse and their particular social position is uniformly and unambiguously associated with ‘designer’ brands.

JESS: In a way, I have to admit, some people, *obviously*, in the cool group, they wear designer things... (School 4 Group 8, 10/11yrs – our italics)

For all the children the link between this group and those materials is, as Jess notes, “obvious.” This particular meaning was also clearly associated with a number of competences to which we now turn.

As explained above we take competences to mean “multiple forms of understandings and knowledgeability” (Shove *et al.*, 2002, p.23) which includes Schatzki’s (1996, p.89) “understandings,

for example, of what to say and do” as well as his “rules” and “principles.” We identified in the data three discrete but interrelated sets of competences related to social position that we have termed “social consumption recognition”, “social consumption performance” and “social consumption communication.” We have structured the rest of our analysis around these competences and show how they combine simultaneously with branded technology and clothes and notions of peer hierarchy to form a clearly identifiable social practice of children’s consumption.

Social consumption recognition

Children recognise a structured social hierarchy regardless of their views about – or satisfaction with it. As Mikey explains to the interviewer:

MIKEY: Everybody wants to be on top, like, popular. Nearly everybody.
 Everybody wants to be ...like, the people that hang out with the best
 people. Coolest people. So everybody looks up to them. But ... it
 doesn’t actually matter (School 6 Group 11, 12/13yrs).

Mikey uses “everybody” four times in this short passage revealing communal belief in the existence of a social reality where being “on top” is desirable and also synonymous with “cool” and “best”.

Mikey’s words also reveal that attitudes to this social hierarchy are not uniform. His use of “nearly” acknowledges that children are not all compelled to desire popularity and his final statement that “it doesn’t actually matter,” shows that he personally does not want to sign up to its values. Yet the *existence* of the hierarchy is not up for debate and, importantly for our identification of a social practice, the existence of the link between popularity and certain materials is also undisputed. The ability to recognise this link constitutes the competence that we have called “social consumption recognition”. The following passage shows the meticulous specificity of the recognised rules governing dressing for popularity:

I: Okay, but you’re saying the popular group are...
LISA: Sometimes people will come to a sporty event in Uggs and they’ll be
 wearing jeggings and stuff...
SIAN: Sometimes they wear really impractical things...
LISA: Just to show how...high...
I: This is out of school?
HENRY: In a field, they could wear a Ralph Lauren thing for no reason, just to
 look brilliant...

ERIN: If it was a non-uniform dayⁱ, and instead of just wearing casual clothes they'd just come in wearing their designer outfits...

LISA: They come in wearing necklaces with gold...

I: And what brands do they wear?

LISA: Wills, Hollister...Definitely Hollister

HENRY: Abercrombie and Fitch...

JO: And when they buy the brands they don't buy them for the quality they buy them for the lettering, that says Hollister or Abercrombie and Fitch...

SIAN: Then people look at them and they...

LISA: Judge them...

SIAN: ...label them...they label them as rich or popular... (School 7 Group 12, 11/12yrs)

The group communally recognise Uggs, Wills, Hollister, Abercrombie and Fitch and Ralph Lauren as brands that show "how high" you are. Sian's use of "people" implies a general understanding of a peer group code whereby these brands act as a 'label' that denotes specific attributes of "rich or popular". Here we also see an undercurrent of shared understanding that ran through all discourses – the associations between "popular" and "rich" which illustrates the sense that carriers of the practice also carry an innate understanding about its constitutive rules and procedures. We are reminded of Reckwitz's definition of a practice as "a routinized way in which ... the world is understood" (2002, p.250).

We get a sense that the children do not like the 'populars' and seek ways of undermining them for example by criticising them for being "impractical" in wearing unsuitable clothes for a muddy sports field "for no reason" and for buying on image rather than "quality". Yet whether or not the 'populars' are liked or disliked the social practice of consumption remains and the children carry it and reinforce it through their recognition of the link between status and brand.

Going back to Mikey's group, another boy Peter mentions a social group that he recognises as contrasting with the "cool group" and that he refers to as "... the lower stage people". Just as Sian in the group above associates "popular" with "rich", the "lower stage people" are seen as "poor" and again this language and labelling demonstrates that children understand the social associations between money, status and particular products. Mikey and Eve explain how this works in relation to phones:

- I: What about kids who don't have very much money. Can you kind of...tell that, or do you...
- MIKEY: You can tell that. By their phones. All you have to do is look at little hints, basically. If they, like, pull out a phone, go like that, you know, they're scared to pull out their phone because they don't want people bullying them or nothing about it.
- I: People get bullied about what phone they've got?
- EVE: Yes. Basically bullies ... 'Oh, your phone's smaller than mine' or 'your phone's crappier than mine' (School 6 Group 11, 12/13yrs).

Mikey describes the "little hints" that give away someone's undesirable place on the social hierarchy. He relates how "you can tell" someone's social position "by their phone" and also how the owner of these undesirable phones are also painfully aware of their significance, because they are "scared" to pull them out in public.

In Mikey's talk we also see another implicit understanding about the social hierarchy – that those at the top bully those at the bottom or else dissociate themselves, as another group explained: "so if you're rich you wouldn't hang around with the people who are poor" (School 6 Group 10, 10/11yrs).

Clearly there already exists a developed literature on conspicuous consumption amongst adults (*e.g.* Bourdieu, 1984; Willis, 1991; Langer, 2002) and a very much smaller one amongst children (*e.g.* Belk *et al.*, 1984; Elliot and Leonard, 2004). However, our analysis goes beyond the classical understanding of consumption as a mechanism for achieving social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Rather, consumption is entirely bound up in children's implicit, taken-for-granted understandings of the topography of their social landscape. It is significant, for example, that the children use the present simple tense in most of their accounts of peer behaviour implying automated, repeated actions; an account of the 'natural order of things'. Coupled both with specific materials and with the competence of social consumption, the result is an embedded and somewhat intractable social practice.

Social consumption performance

However, "knowing in the sense of being able to evaluate a performance", such as recognising the consumption-based hierarchies, "is not the same as knowing in the sense of having the skills to perform" (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p.23), and so we turn to 'social consumption performance'. The data shows that maintaining a place at the top of the social hierarchy and above the "lower stages"

requires careful attention to appearance in order to be seen and to stand out. As Anna and Katie told the interviewer:

ANNA: There's a group in L class, that they care about how they smell, they care about how they look...they care about what they wear.... ...they care if they get muddy, they're...

KATIE: Drama queens (School 4, Group 7, 9/10yrs).

And as Jo explained, "There's the popular group, they're sort of obsessed with their appearance..." (School 7 Group 12, 11/12yrs). Similarly, another girl noted that "some [the 'populars'] dress to like... dress so that everyone looks at them. Like, really different" (School 6 Group 10, 10/11yrs), reminding us of Sian and Henry's description above of the 'cool' girls turning up to sporting events in impractical Ugg boots and jeggings just to show off; or being "in a field" wearing "a Ralph Lauren thing for no reason, just to look brilliant..." (School 7 Group 12, 11/12yrs). These accounts suggest that social consumption performance competence for members of the cool group consists of maintaining visibility by being "obsessed by appearance" and attracting and commanding attention by looking "really different" from the others around them.

However, popularity is not the only or, indeed, the most common social objective. As we have seen, the popular children are not universally (or even mostly) liked. Our data also shows other social consumption performances with more positively affirmed consequences. Discussing what groups of people wear on non-uniform days the extract below revolves around how "normal" or "friendly" people like Alex 'perform' compared to both the cool people and another social group that they recognise and label as the "people that want to be cool".

DAISY: Yes, like Alex just wears casual, if you get what I mean...

ALEX: Everyday clothes...because all the cool people when they come in wear different clothes that they would wear on a normal day...

I: So, like they dress up? Is that right?

[several say 'Yes']

ALEX: But then like the friendly people just wear casual clothes like you would on a normal day.

And people that want to be cool are just wearing cool stuff, but they don't go...

DYLAN: It's just like "Ugh, sorry!"

ALEX: "What, where are you wearing that?"

It's like a long sleeved t-shirt with shorts on!

[laughter]

DAISY: And flip-flops and socks, ugh, and with sandals! (School 4, Group 8
10/11yrs.)

The rules of the practice proscribe different performances for different positions on the social hierarchy. Indeed, as Shove *et al.* (2012) explain, to fully understand the dynamic of a practice we must consider the “local variations of performance and enactment [that] accumulate and persist” (p.126). Thus wearing “casual” or “normal clothes” is required to be seen as “normal” whereas to be popular demands “dressing up.” Beyond this “normal clothes” serve to lubricate peer-to-peer relationships whereas “dressing up” means social elevation and aloofness. As Peter explained, “I usually hang around with people that like have the same stuff or like the same stuff, so then you get along better” (School 6 Group 11, 11/12yrs). SPT thus offers an additional interpretation of Miles *et al.*’s (1998) seminal analysis of “fitting in and sticking out” (p.81). For these authors the two performances illustrate a “paradox that seems to underlie youth experiences of consumption: the idea that everybody’s individual taste somehow transforms itself into communal taste”, (p.89). Using a SPT lens we come to see that there are actually two performance scripts that conjoin meaning and materials in a recognised and reproducible way.

The discussion of “people that want to be cool” also reveals that beyond the shared understanding of how to dress to be either ‘cool’ or ‘normal’ there are clearly established norms related to the “right” way to dress. One ‘wrong’ dressing performance picked out by Alex, Dylan and Daisy is wearing unsuitable combinations, in their words things that “don’t go” “like a long sleeved t-shirt with shorts on!” This behaviour attracts both ridicule (laughter) and disgust “ugh”. The children’s drive to avoid ridicule is in line with Wooten’s research, which explored “ridicule as a mechanism through which adolescents learn, sometimes painfully, about consumption practices deemed unacceptable to influential others” (Wooten, 2006, p.188). However, our analysis frames the avoidance of ridicule as a competence necessary for the performance of a social practice rather than as a mechanism for individual socialization.

Selecting the ‘right’ clothes on non-uniform day was not the only social consumption performance competence we encountered in the data. We also observed a pattern whereby children repeatedly attempted to assert their authority over classmates by flaunting their product expertise, often through in depth talk about product features, prices and availability. In this group, at two junctures in the discussion Jake and Peter compete to show their expertise on consoles and video games. To begin with they discuss the scenario of the two fictitious boys Sam and Tom (see methodology).

- JAKE: To put this in a nutshell, I think that Sam is a normal kid who's smart and stuff, and has his mum to help him, and Tom is a spoiled kid who is quite dumb and doesn't have his parents around to help him, and he plays his PlayStation and he should get an Xbox!
- I: [laughs] Oh dear! How come PlayStation is not as good as an Xbox?
- JAKE: Well, they're both quite good, but I've always been more of an Xbox fan.
- PETER: But you've been saying...you don't like it when people say that you play on the PS2.
- JAKE: Well, PS2 and 360 are both good systems, but...I'm not saying that PlayStation is bad...
- TINA: I think Xbox Kinect is good. (School 6 Group 11, age 12/13yrs)

Jake begins by attempting to assert superiority through his product knowledge but is challenged by both the interviewer and Peter, before Tina also joins in with her view. However, later in the discussion when the children are talking about what the government should do for children Jake makes another attempt to assert himself by demonstrating knowledge about brands of consoles and their corporate history:

- JAKE: I want SEGA...I want them (the government) to make the company SEGA make another console, because in 1999 they made an awesome console called the Dreamcast and...
- PETER: Apparently they're making the Dreamcast 2.
- JAKE: No they're not. And when the PS2 came along, SEGA said that's it, we're quitting the console business and I do want them to come back, because if they do they'll absolutely thrash the Wii and the 360 and the PS3.

This time Jake refuses to be put down by Peter and we can see how his social performance of loyalty to SEGA and detailed knowledge about its credentials relative to other brands is being used to signal a dominant position in the peer hierarchy. Rather than interpreting the competence of 'product knowledge' as an independent mechanism for consumer socialization (John, 1999) we see in this exchange how the social practice of consumption comprises a block of interrelated elements: materials (different brands of games consoles) combined with the competence (publicly demonstrating product expertise) that has shared meaning (those who know more about products can assert their superiority over peers and protect their social position).

Social consumption communication

The third competence we observed is what we call ‘social consumption communication’ as it became apparent that there were tacit rules governing the subtle line between what can and cannot be talked about in relation to consumption. If this was not managed effectively it would lead to a negative perception by peers. In the following discussion Peter describes an occasion when this line is crossed:

PETER: Because I have a friend who’s an only child, and for Christmas he got a laptop, a Blackberry phone...£300 pounds on iTunes and loads more stuff. He announced that all out in college time and everyone was all like ‘Shut up!’ It’s because he didn’t shut up he was spoiled (School 6 Group 11, 11/12yrs).

This group had already derided “spoilt” children earlier in the discussion, but the most serious social transgression committed by the friend was the specific way in which he disclosed all the desirable things he had been given for Christmas. The disclosure was quite simply too public, as shown by Peter’s use of the verb “announce” and the detail that the context was “college time” – which is presumably when the whole class is together. The shift from the first person to the use of “everyone” indicates that it is a commonly understood rule that the friend had broken. Perhaps most telling is Peter’s statement that it was “because he didn’t shut up, he was spoiled”. Receiving desirable objects is acceptable within the structure of children’s consumption practice but talking about it too much is not. Those who fail to demonstrate this competence see their social position suffer.

In addition to how *much* to talk about new consumer goods, there were also quite particular rules evident in the children’s descriptions about *how* to communicate. This is illustrated in the following scenario where Anna is forgiven for admitting to being ‘rich’, whereas her peer Hayley, also well off, is lambasted as spoilt:

ANNA: Hayley said that I was spoilt, because my nan... my granddad gets a very big pension...And we have this... my nan’s house, and then a huge yard, and then garages and more garages and the train station, and we have my aunties and a built-in swimming pool and a Jacuzzi room and everything, and Hayley said that that was spoiled and I said compared to what she has, that isn’t spoiled.

OWEN: That isn’t anything compared to what she has!

Although Hayley has allegedly associated ‘being spoilt’ with being well off, Anna manages to convey a description of her family’s luxurious accommodation such that she is not treated by Owen or

George as being spoilt. She seems to achieve this by purposefully shifting the focus away from herself. She starts by saying “we have this...” but stumbles, removes the possessive pronoun and changes tack to present a simple list of the family’s extensive grounds which she makes seem mundane and unexceptional through using only one adjective “huge” and repeating “then” and “and.” She also shifts the focus away from herself to other members of her family (her nan and auntie) thus distancing herself from the riches.

A comparison with Isaac’s description of the way Hayley talks allows us to understand the children’s unspoken rule of how to speak about possessions:

ISAAC: I need to say something about Hayley, it’s just...

I: Say one thing and then I want to move on from Hayley,
because there’s been a lot about Hayley.

OWEN: No, we’ve got to talk about Hayley, because she’s spoiled.

ISAAC: She is like the only person in this whole school that rubs it in our face and then when we do stuff she goes “What the hell’s that? That’s rubbish!” (School 4 Group 7, 9/10yrs).

Whilst Anna gives an ‘objective’, depersonalised, unembellished account of her wealth, Hayley apparently makes specific comparisons between what she has and what the others’ lack. Although, as noted by the interviewer, they have spent much of the group time criticising Hayley, Isaac is finally able to sum up why her behaviour is so offensive; it transgresses the unwritten rule of social consumption that prohibits comparative bragging. Isaac uses a graphic, physical expression to explain how she “rubs it in our face” and his use of “only” and “whole” underlines quite how deviant her behaviour is from the accepted norm of the social practice.

The rule related to comparative bragging is apparent in other discussions. Shona and Alex, for example, describe a girl called Sarah-Jane:

SHONA: She’s...when she gets something she teases me, and she’s like...

ALEX: She gets the stuff that other people haven’t, and she goes round saying “I’ve got this, I’ve got that” and me and Charlie Brown and Josh said “Oh, whatever” and a really rude word... (School 4 Group 8, 10/11yrs).

Again the transgression is in the spoken comparison with peers. Sarah-Jane “teases” others about the stuff “that other people haven’t” provoking a negative reaction and “a really rude word.”

Conclusion and Discussion

The study provides the first attempt to use a Social Practice Theory perspective to analyse children’s consumption. At a fundamental level, applying Shove *et al.*’s (2012) SPT framework to children’s talk with and about peers enabled us to discover a bounded and consistently linked set of materials, meanings and competences that were evidenced across groups in different UK social and geographical settings. Specifically, we have shown how branded clothes and technology products offered by the marketplace combine - in regular, repeated and predictable ways with both the socially sanctioned objective of achieving and maintaining a place in the peer hierarchy and the three skills we have labelled social consumption recognition, social consumption performance and social consumption communication. An ordered, patterned and thus reproduce-able nexus of actions (Schatzki, 2002) was clearly evident suggesting the existence of a social practice: a shared social reality for UK children age 8-13. This allows us an intriguing new view of children’s consumption as a reproductive performance reliant on relatively stable links between specific materials, meanings and competences.

Of particular interest is “the implicit, tacit or unconscious layer of knowledge which enables a symbolic organisation of reality” (Reckwitz, 2002, p.246). For we have seen that the children do not talk about the practice *per se* or, indeed, necessarily consciously set out to perform it, but yet it is clearly embedded in their discourse, perhaps most evidently in their use of the word ‘obvious’. From the overarching knowledge that, “obviously everyone wants a lot of things” - something that drives the very act of consumption - to the more nuanced understanding that “obviously, in the cool group, they wear designer things”. The unacknowledged practice guides individual agency but because the processes therein “do not lie within the realm of discursive consciousness”, their practical knowledge is “guided by structural features – rules and resources” (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p.3, citing Giddens, 1984), be it wearing designer clothes to be popular or knowing when to be quiet about your new mobile phone.

It is also notable that the variability of the children’s experiences, rather than obfuscating the ‘structural features and rules’ of the social practice, in fact serves to illuminate them. The different

types of 'social consumption performances' such as the ostentatious display of gold jewellery or clothes by Abercrombie and Fitch as a signal of popularity, or the wearing of 'casual' clothes by the 'friendly' people actually reinforces the reality of a peer hierarchy with positions at the top, the bottom and in the middle. Reverence, acceptance or rejection by peers was consistently and automatically linked not only with specific yet different products but also with competence or failings around their consumption.

SPT, by shifting the focus away from the child, the social context or the products also provides an alternative theoretical perspective on children's consumption that allows new interpretations of already observed phenomena. It provides a particularly striking contrast to consumer socialisation literature that both privileges the role of cognitive competence and implicitly defines 'successful' consumption as the gradual acquisition by individual children of a specific set of sophisticated reasoning skills defined by John (1999) as "advertising and persuasion knowledge" (p.188), "transaction knowledge" (p.192), "decision-making skills and abilities" (p.196); and "purchase influence and negotiation strategies" (p.200). This view has an eye to the future, seeking to understand how children gradually become reflexive adults who can cope with the external realities of the consumer world. An SPT view instead focuses on the present by seeking to understand the structure of the everyday social reality experienced by children in the here and now. John's (1999) analysis of children's 'shopping scripts' (a subset of 'transaction knowledge') is a case in point. She relates a study by Karsten (1996) showing that kindergarten children are extremely adept at re-enacting the process of purchasing products in a (pretend) shop:

Even the youngest subjects in the study understood that one selected their item, checked their money, decided what to purchase and placed it on the cashier's counter, waited for the cashier to check and record the prices and perhaps offer change – they even reminded the interviewer to hand them a pretend receipt" (p.109).

The use of 'even' twice in this short passage implies surprise that such young children are so competent despite what the author would see as a 'lack' of cognitive abilities. Yet from a SPT perspective this finding is unsurprising and serves to demonstrate that children implicitly learn and rehearse social practices from an extremely young age and that the practice, strengthened through the children's performance of it, exists outside the realities of individual cognitive development.

Avenues for Further Research

The SPT approach thus opens up new vistas on children's consumption research that stretch far beyond a rather static age-stage conceptualisation of the relationship between individual children and the commercial world to a deep understanding of the interlinked, implicit, routinized daily performances that create and reinforce children's consumption. The focus on children also adds a rich new dimension to existing work on practices from CCT scholars (e.g Martens, 2012; Holttinen, 2014).

In terms of future research, the first imperative is for more research to replicate this study in other contexts, and with close attention to any differences between socio-economic group, national culture or age group. One fascinating substantive area in our study that could be further explored is why the 'populars' are so unpopular.

Beyond this, a particularly intriguing avenue lies in the notion that individuals are "unique crossing points" (Reckwitz, 2002, p.256) for different practices. Within our data we were able to see that the social practice of consumption overlapped with other bundled, co-located practices which they carried, such as parenting, family communication, sibling interaction, and leisure time practices. For example, the potential impact of parenting practices on a child's practice of consumption (in this case of media) is illustrated by Kelly, who describes differences in practice between her home and her friend Esther's:

I'm allowed to go on the computer when I want, watch TV when I want... [but] Esther, her mum will only let her watch TV for about an hour or something (UK School 5 Depth 1, 10/11yrs).

In addition to understanding how children are crossing points between family and peer practices there is also scope to explore how the practices carried by professional marketing and media executives overlap with children's consumption practices. Marketing provides a constant stream of new materials and meanings around consumer goods which consequently provide the requirement for new competences by the children. Indeed as Warde (2005, p.141) notes, "Producers attempt to mould practices in line with their commercial interests". Marketing practices such as product design, strategic communication, segmentation, targeting and positioning are likely to overlap with and thus continually change the constituency of the children's consumption practice. This in turn may provide more opportunities for children to fall short when attempting to perform the closely linked practices of consumption and social positioning. This constitutes a novel, important and completely untapped stream of marketing and consumption research.

One possible site of interest is the marketing practice of “collectibles” (such as Pokemon cards or Dr Who paraphernalia) where children are encouraged to make multiple purchases in order to increase overall sales for the company. How might this commercially driven social practice orchestrated in the offices of marketing agencies overlap with children’s social practice of swapping and trading cards and goods in the playground (Nairn et al., 2008) and using the amassed currency of the collectibles in their social positioning?

A potentially fascinating methodological challenge is also raised in terms of how to gather and analyse data to explore how commercially driven adult social practices overlap with those of children. Our thematic analysis of children’s talk has indicated the promise of applying forms of discourse analysis (Edley, 2001) to scrutinise the very specific language used by children and thus, by extension, their adult counterparts. Indeed, whilst a canon of literature exists on collecting data from children (Tinson, 2011) scant attention has been paid to methodologies for analysing the voices of children once the data is collected.

Policy Implications

In terms of public policy, the shifted focus from the individual child to the totality of a social practice has potentially far reaching implications because SPT moves the spotlight firmly away from the vexed, dichotomous value-judgement implicit in discourses around whether and when children are ‘vulnerable’ or ‘savvy’ (Cross, 2004; Langer, 2004; DCSF/DCMS, 2009). This value-judgement has largely underpinned policy recommendations for responsible marketing because the debate on ‘fair’ marketing has tended to rest on ascertaining either an age at which children are sufficiently cognitively competent to understand the intentions of the marketer (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Nairn and Fine, 2008), or whether such cognitive competence can be boosted through literacy training programmes. Thus countries such as Norway and Sweden have simply banned TV advertising to those under 12 on the basis that they do not have sufficient cognitive competence to understand persuasive intent below this age, whilst other countries have introduced into schools programmes such as Media Smart (2013) that provide media literacy education to enhance awareness of marketing tactics amongst children of all ages.

However, our research implies that powerful elements of children’s consumption are largely unthinking and undisclosed and thus unlikely to be affected by initiatives that focus solely on cognitive capacity. Hence ‘protecting’ children from or ‘educating’ them about advertising responds to only a very small part of the role of consumption in their lives. The real challenge for policy makers is to try to alleviate the pressures children experience to consume within the rigid rules of

social positioning: something that involves a consideration of the totality of the practice, the links between the elements of the practice and other overlapping bundles of practices. This requires a new policy focus that involves “taking the focus away from the actor and putting it instead on the actions” (Chatterton and Anderson, 2011, p.22). Future research on the actions or social practice of marketing professionals may illuminate this issue.

In the meantime, we do see advertising regulations as playing a role in that they could help reduce the strength and nature of some of the links between materials, meaning and competence. As Martens *et al.* (2004) assert, we must not underestimate “the capacity of the media to impact on which goods and services are ‘best’ for the forging of social bonds and group acceptance... to which children appear susceptible” (p.166). For example we can perhaps trace the powerful divisive meaning that the children in our research attributed to Abercrombie and Fitch branded clothes to the strong influence on corporate marketing communications of Mike Jefferies the Managing Director who stated in a recent interview,

In every school there are the cool and popular kids, and then there are the not-so-cool kids ... Candidly, we go after the cool kids A lot of people don't belong [in our clothes], and they can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely (Farfan, 2014).

Currently Article 18 of the International Chamber of Commerce Code on Advertising and Marketing Communication Practice (2011) – that forms the basis for global advertising self-regulation - states that,

Marketing communications should not suggest that possession or use of the promoted product will give a child or young person physical, psychological or social advantages over other children or young people or that not possessing the product will have the opposite effect (p. 10).

Yet our data shows that this is precisely what happens. We suggest that much stronger, specific guidelines on advertising content need to be created so that communications for brands attractive for young people do not imply, however subtly, that the brand confers superiority over others. This could be achieved in the case of clothing, for example, by ensuring that the imagery includes a wide range of models clearly from a range of backgrounds.

We are hopeful that more SPT research, particularly involving the social practice of marketing professionals, will allow deeper understanding of what we have shown to be the rather difficult and fraught nature of the social practice of children’s consumption.

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ⁱ In UK most children wear school uniforms. Occasionally schools have "non-uniform days" where children can wear what they want.